

Radical Middle Way Transcripts



from Protest to Engagement

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Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad on:
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Bismillah Al-Rahmān Al-Rahīm

[Opening du'ā']

Al-salām 'alaykum everyone.

It's an honour to be here again. Sometimes I feel like a stranger amongst Muslims these days because I feel that around me there are so many long faces, agitated people, pessimists, as though the few political events somehow endangered the great triumphant bulldozer that is the history of this Ummah.

As a historian I think I can take the longer view. I see many grounds for not only hope, but real optimism. A crowd such as this – unimaginable. When I first became Muslim is a sign of that. The quality, the caliber, the seriousness of so many of our young people is another; the enthusiasm with which so many of them roll up their sleeves in order to deal with the challenges of the times. And particularly those whom have devoted their lives, abandoned, sometimes quite considerable financial prospects in order to seek sacred knowledge either in institutions of this country and abroad, and now are returning in ever increasing numbers in order to shine a torch around in this benighted - spiritually speaking - part of the world and to remind people of that thing which, really is the simplest of all things to understand, as it is the simplest of all things to say which is *la ilaha illa Allah*; that thing without which nothing else can really go right. The simple source of meaning that gives meaning to the whole of the complex jigsaw puzzle of life.

And I see those young people coming back, and I see not only the joy of *imān* on their faces but also the wisdom of Allah's Law in their hearts. Do we live of course times in that are challenging, and if we take a moment to think about it, we find it hardly surprising. To think that Islām can enter the modern world with its well established traditions of secularity, materialism and liberal capitalism and every possible 'ism' as long as it is not theism- belief in God, and to assume there will be not collision or impact would be an idol supposition. Of course, sparks are flying, and sometimes those sparks are the wrong sparks and they hurt people. And nonetheless I look around and see the signs of a new spring for a re-growth of genuine, rather than superficial towbah.

We know that, one of the greatest achievements of the *chosen one*, sall Allahu 'alayhī wa sallām, amongst his endless list of great achievements was that he took a people, sunk in tribalism and took them in a new concept of humanity, where tribal affiliation while known, had no particular implications. Given the millennial history of Arabia that's a pretty extraordinary accomplishment. And we know also the doctrine of *tawhīd*, which unites people as one Ummah under the One True God and which finds abhorrent any kind of tribal factionalism, is damaged. If we try to turn Islām into a tribe –and sometimes we do that, we assume that there are the Muslims and there are the 'others'. Whereas historically I think the great 'ulamā' were more comfortable with the idea that there is truth and there is falsehood, and there is goodness and wickedness, there is light and there is darkness but that the two were never in this nest that is the material world, completely and tidily differentiated.

If we don't think tribally, if we don't think in the 'jāhili' idea of 'them' and 'us' but rather in terms of true and false, and the gradation of rightness we see in different sorts of people, then we start to acquire something of the Prophetic gift, of the discernment of spirits. So that the believer who has transcended this reduction of Islām to simply a tribe amongst other national and religious tribes, the believer who sees what matters, which is commitment to *lā ilaha illa Allah*, is the one who will not be a thoughtless zealot to his own community and a vile fanatic towards others. Because Allah subhāna wa ta'ālā has gifted us with a type of human intuition, a '*fitra*', that allows us automatically, if it's activated and not suffocated by rage and fear, that can perceive the presence of light and truth and goodness, right on the other side of religious boundaries. And in this country where we are pretty small, though a growing minority, we have historically unusual opportunities for activating that ability. Unless we are particularly blinkered or stupid or isolated, we've all had the experience of seeing in people from our own community wickedness, stupidity and short sightedness. And in people of other communities, a genuine presence of light and hope and a desire to serve others.

Sometimes when this is stated we retreat if we are fearful into the old tribal language that assumes goodness is only on our side and wickedness without. But most of us who have lived in this culture and other cultures engaged with people, befriended people, know that the situation is a great deal more complex.

So it seems to me that we have two great options as we consider our prospect and really, our un-guessable future in this new field of da'wah for Islām. We can huddle up like penguins in a blizzard, we can curl up in a prickly ball like a frightened hedgehog and curse and damn everything that is around us because it happens in most cases not to know *la ilaha illa Allah*. Or we can start to activate the prophetic capacity which says *laysu sawā* – 'they are not the same'; they are amongst Ahl Al-Kitāb - up right people, and after all the Qur'ān itself addresses them, and if they were completely sunk into darkness they would have no way of recognizing its truth. But this way of acknowledging that goodness is not exactly co-terminus with the boundaries of the Ummah of Islām, which is certainly the prophetic view, requires a certain amount of confidence and courage. The tribal mentality is the primitive mentality - the one that really doesn't need to think. Because the tribalist is simply interested in your point of origin, your ethnicity, the kind of name you have. This is the BNP possibility which is a possibility in religion as it is in national self definition. And that's easy, and you can do it well and be very stupid and you can do it particularly well if your frightened and insecure, and your worried about the attrition of the new generation or about immigration or about any number of things that the world might be throwing at you. But the more difficult path is the path which transcends tribalism, which says '*laysu sawā*' – 'they're not all the same'.

The one that says according to a hadīth, '*Al-nāsu ma-ādin kamā a'ādin Al-thahebi wa Al-fidha, fa khiyārahum fī Al-jāhiliya khiyārahum fī Al-Islām ithā faqihu.*' '*People are mines like mines of gold and silver. And the best of them in jāhiliya are the best of them in Islām once they have come to understanding.*'

That hadīth itself presupposes that there are 'khiyār' – the best people in jahiliya, '*laysu sawā*' – they are not all the same. And this of course is the basis of any healthy Muslim community, whose concern is not with survival or tribalism or demarcating

boundaries or 'not being like them' but rather with the true prophetic commission, which is to convey the message of *lā ilaha illa Allah*.

But that requires courage. That requires a willingness to be exposed, to enter into argument. And even more difficult to enter into a situation in which one genuinely listens to others. How easily we forget the fact that other people are really not terribly different to ourselves. That behind all of the doctrines and different sorts of faces, the different genders, the different classes, the different levels of education, there's a human consciousness that's probably just as worried and confused or as confident and serene as our own. Human consciousness is the human consciousness – whatever clothing it may have put on as a result of education and accidents of birth and culture.

The Qur'ān addresses the soul. Look at Seyyidinā Musa (as), the glorious telling of his encounter in Sūrat Ta-Ha with Far'oun, he does not repeat the words that are put in his mouth by the Book of Genesis which are pure tribal: '*Let my People go.*' He asked for that, that the banī Isra'īl should be set free, but he also speaks about Allah (swt) to the one who is the very essence of Qur'ānic understanding and definition of *kufṛ* – misguidance.

The great wisdom of that story is that what is uppermost in the true believing heart is not 'them versus us,' the people versus the other, but rather truth and falsehood. That's the remarkable wisdom of the recasting of that story. How are we when we confront Far'oun, usually we don't but we might confront his representatives or we might confront people who are from a civilisation who have internalised some of the worst possibilities of human civilisation – human greed, cupidity, shortsightedness. Is our immediate instinct to reach out to recognize there is a soul that is hungry; a soul that needs everything that everybody else needs without which we can never really be at peace, which is the *dthikr* of Allah (swt). A soul that needs to be whole and that is crying out for a medicine to heal it. Is that the first thing comes to our minds when we encounter somebody new who has not been brought up as a Muslim? Or do we immediately, like fools, snap into some kind of tribal thinking – 'them versus us,' rather than the real prophetic insight, which is humanity versus the devil?

Everybody is potentially a member of the Ummah of Seyyidnā Muhammad (saw). And we must make sure that on the Last Day nobody has an argument against us; that the very people who we despised, even our neighbours in this world because they are '*kufār! kufār!*' do not stand before our Lord and say 'he lived next to me for twenty years but never bothered to tell me about what he believed. I would have listened.' Everybody is interested in Islām now, there are usually contexts in which things could have been discussed, but no 'he didn't bother because he might have looked at me over the fence as he was mowing his lawn every Sunday morning but in his heart there was '*kufar! Kufar!*'

Are we to be hedgehogs or are we to embrace. That is the question, the real question which we need to ask ourselves and of which the outside worlds needs to ask of us. Because we won't be taken seriously as a religious community if we behave just like a tribe. And we won't be taken seriously as a people of God if we just assume Islām is just a political party. Islām is about truth or it is not worth every much. Can this truth transcend our tribalism? Will we have the strength really to reach out, to recognise the common humanity that exists in the hearts of others? To recognize that others,

like ourselves are crying out for a healing in the soul? That's the big question that faces the Muslim Community today.

Mawlāna Rumi tells the story of a woman who is holding a baby and the baby is crying. And she's trying to go about her task but she can't really concentrate on anything as she's holding this crying baby. She tries different things. She tries to give it some sweets, *luqum* Turkish delight, but it doesn't stop the baby crying. She tries to give the baby some kebab but the baby is not interested in the kebab. She tries a nice sweet cup of Turkish coffee but the baby is still crying and she's can't get things done and it seems to be getting worse and her whole life seems to be ruined because of this stressful bundle in her arms. And finally she contemplates and considers and realises that the most obvious and natural thing is the things the baby most craves, and she feeds the baby from her own milk.

Mawlāna Rumi says this is what we are all like. There is something within us that is crying and yelling and that wants sustenance. And that thing is our soul. Our 'rūh' and it wants the only thing that can nourish it and bring it peace but instead we try and give it all kinds of other things. We go out and book a new holiday. Or buy the latest model of a Mercedes, or whatever it might be but still it doesn't seem to solve the problem. What we really need is the milk which is the *dthikr*. And the highest form of *dthikr* is *lā ilaha illā Allah*. And when we have that '*tatmi'inu Al - Qulūb*' – the hearts are at rest.

That is the responsibility of Muslims here. First of all to make sure that we are being nourished and that the sort of Islām we are involved in is nourishing and not making us more freaked out and anxious about the state of the world, and our families and ourselves. And then when we have that serenity to move on to try and convey this life giving milk to others, because the world today has everything except what really matters. They have material riches beyond the dreams of Fir'oun. They have unimaginable opportunities for leisure, health care and education. But still they are stressing out. More and more of them are on antidepressants, Prozac, tranquilizers, suicide rates the divorce rates, all the famous indicators of human unhappiness continue to rise. It's our responsibility more than anybody else to try and resolve that but we can't resolve it if all we are doing is staying in the mosque saying '*kufār! kufār!*' and that's mostly what we do.

But I have suggested the reason we do it is because we are scared. Just as the ancient Arab tribes were kind of scared of each other; that they might raid them by night, who knows. That they might kick your door down at six in the morning and take you to Paddington green, so you say '*kufār! kufār!*' in the hope that if you say it often enough things will get a little better. So far it doesn't seem to be working too well.

What if instead of that we actually grow a bit. And grow up a bit. And start saying 'human souls, human souls, human souls that might have a big argument against us on the yawm Al-Qiyāma when we are strutting about thinking we are the ones who will be fine. What if they have a stronger argument against us then we have against them. What if the Judgement precedes along lines that we find terrifyingly surprising, but that in the aftermath make a lot of sense? But this requires strength and people of great character. It requires believers who don't just say *lā ilaha illa Allah* but who have it deeply engraved in their hearts. Because if you say *lā ilaha illa Allah* and it is there deeply in your heart, then everything you do has a different

meaning, and usually what you do is different. Because if you say *lā ilaha illa Allah*, then you are saying that He alone is Lord of history, He alone is in charge, everything is in His hands and they are Good Hands. '*hasbun Allah wa ni'ma Al-wakīl*' those who don't panic, in the Qur'ān, that what they say. He is enough for us and an excellent Guardian. If you have that *tawīd* deeply in your heart, you won't freak out, you won't panic, you won't fret, you will be in the state of *tu'manīna* and when you have that strength of character, when you are a proper Muslim, then you will not look at everybody else as a potential threat or somebody you secretly envy, you won't be full of complexes instead you will sincerely see them as people who need help.

Is that our attitude? At the moment I think it's not. So what we need really is to take a decision. Is it going to be the hedgehog option? Islām as a political party, 'them and us', mutually exclusive world views and interests or is it going to be a sense that everybody has a soul – white, black, Muslim, *kāfir*, mentally handicapped, baby, old lady in the retirement home that nobody visits, they all have souls, they are all accountable to their Lord. And the responsibility of anybody who thinks that they mean it when they say *la ilaha illa Allah*, is towards all of those people without exception. Those that are ummat Al-da'wa and ummat Al-ijāba, humanity falls into those two categories. The people or are summoned and the people who have responded. Some of our own people have properly responded, only partially responded. Then there are other who have responded very well, even though the reality of *lā ilaha illā Allah* hasn't fully been presented to them. Many of them may be better people than our own people. When we can acknowledge that, then we can claim that *lā ilaha illā Allah* have percolated somewhere into our hearts.

But if we just sit around in the mosques watching the headlines and saying '*kufār kufār!*' the world will not respect us anymore and the current polarisation will become more and more acute until there is some unimaginable showdown. And if because we are the ones who have precipitated that all we are is a political party, a bunch of misfits then the outcome may not necessarily go in our favour. But if we bring the weapon which is insuperable which can never be defeated which is truth, and all that goes with truth, which means submission to Allah's Decree, knowledge that history is in good hands real *tawhīd*, real *tawwaqul* real *rida*. If we are people of relaxation and calm in the midst of the craziness of the modern world then people will come to us, we won't have to knock on their doors or lean over the fences and they will say, 'what have you got that we haven't got, give us some of it. We need the medicine as well, is there enough to go round?' and we will say 'Al-hamd lillah there is plenty to go around, because Allah's rahma encompasses everything in His Creation.'

So we ask Allah (swt) to give the strength that goes with real *tawhīd* and with reality of *lā ilaha illā Allah* and to make us the kind of Muslim minority that good people of this country deserve and not the kind of Muslim minority that the bad people in the country want us to be.

Jazākum Allahu khayran wa salāmu 'alaykum wa rahmat Allah



Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad

Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad is one of Islam's leading thinkers today. He graduated from Cambridge University with a double-first in Arabic in 1983. He then lived in Cairo for three years, studying Islam under traditional teachers at Al-Azhar, one of the oldest universities in the world. He went on to reside for three years in Jeddah, where he administered a commercial translation office and maintained close contact with Habib Ahmad Mashhur al-Haddad and other ulama from Hadramaut, Yemen.

In 1989, Shaykh Abdal Hakim returned to England and spent two years at the University of London learning Turkish and Farsi. Since 1992 he has been a doctoral student at Oxford University, specializing in the religious life of the early Ottoman Empire. He is currently Secretary of the Muslim Academic Trust (London) and Director of the Sunna Project at the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at Cambridge University, which issues the first-ever scholarly Arabic editions of the major Hadith collections.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim is the translator of a number of works, including two volumes from Imam al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*. He gives *durus* and *halaqas* from time to time and taught the works of Imam al-Ghazali at the Winter 1995 Deen Intensive Program in New Haven, CT. He appears frequently on BBC Radio and writes occasionally for a number of publications, including *The Independent*; *Q-News*, Britain's premier Muslim Magazine; and *Seasons*, the semiacademic journal of Zaytuna Institute.

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